

GRITLOCK

**Are the Liberals
in Forever?**

Peter G. White • Adam Daifallah

**Canadian Political Bookshelf,
Toronto**

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Acknowledgments

This book was first contemplated in February 2001, and is on sale eight months later. Since it is aimed at a moving target, we deemed that timeliness and relevance to Canada's contemporary political situation were more important than academic perfection; so the usual disclaimer about any errors being our fault is more than usually appropriate.

As traditional publishers do not operate at that speed, we were fortunate to learn, at the end of June, of a rapidly growing company in Belleville, Ontario — Essence Publishing. We are grateful to David Visser, Gus Henne and their associates at Essence for their willingness to adapt to our timetable. We would also like to thank Karen Petherick of Intuitive Design International Ltd. in Markham, Ontario for her quick and excellent work on the cover design. Distribution was capably handled by Bill Hushion of Hushion House Publishing Ltd., Toronto.

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Toronto historian Michael Bliss (who rejects our assessment that Brian Mulroney's economic record surpassed Pierre Trudeau's) kindly allowed us to quote his view that our description of the blackening of Mulroney's public image "smacks of wounded partisanship".

Finally, Peter White wants to thank especially his wife Mary White – for many things, but above all for allowing their house to be taken over by a parallel National Archives. A dining-room table may yet emerge again from underneath the stacks.

*Peter G. White
Knowlton, Que*

*Adam Daifallah
Kingston, Ont.*

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How to Cooperate and Beat the Liberals

Column by Tom Flanagan in the *National Post*, Friday, June 5, 2001

Canadian Alliance leader Stockwell Day yesterday announced he will ask his party's national executive to hold a party referendum within 90 days on co-operation with the Progressive Conservatives. Meanwhile, dissatisfied New Democrats dream of creating a new vehicle on the left. Indeed, the two efforts are not inimical to each other, because chipping away at the Liberals from both the right and the left may be the only way for Canadians to get any alternation in government.

It's exhilarating to contemplate, but agonizingly hard to achieve, because politics never involves writing on a blank slate. Political parties have to learn to co-operate with each other, putting vested interests, careers, and big egos at risk. It's tough, but not impossible.

Stockwell Day, Joe Clark, Svend Robinson, and all the others talking about the co-operation and reorganization of political parties don't have to reinvent the wheel. Political history offers at

least five models that parties can follow if they want to get together. None is perfect, but all are worth considering.

The most minimal possibility is unilateral action, in which one party refrains from contesting certain seats. The British Liberals did this early in the 20th century when they were far bigger than Labour and didn't need any reciprocal concessions. They reasoned correctly that, in a score of industrial ridings, Labour would have a better chance of beating the Conservatives, thus making it easier for the Liberals to form a government. If all else fails, the Canadian Alliance and/or the Progressive Conservatives might unilaterally decide not to challenge the other party's incumbents, or not to run in certain parts of the country.

The virtue of this approach is that a party can go ahead and do it without having to reach an agreement. However, it can be difficult to impose withdrawal upon the party's rank-and-file, and some riding associations might insist on running quasi-independent candidates. Yet, if the number is not too great, unilateral withdrawal can still have a practical effect.

A stronger level of co-operation is the electoral alliance, in which two or more parties devise a common platform and agree to share out candidacies according to a negotiated formula. The Liberals and Conservatives did this successfully in British Columbia in the 1940s to keep the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) out of power. The Liberals and Social Democrats did it with less success in the British election of 1987.

An electoral alliance allows parties to keep their identities yet co-operate in a coalition capable of winning an election and governing. One major challenge, in addition to negotiating a joint platform and keeping the grassroots in line, is to sort out who will be prime minister in case of victory. Lack of clarity

about who was really top dog helped to sink the Liberal-Social Democrat coalition in 1987.

A still tighter form of collaboration is the federation, in which parties unite under a common leader and create a new legal identity, but keep their identities and organizations as federated elements. The CCF followed this model in 1932, as did the left-wing Alliance party in New Zealand in 1991.

The federation model allows parties to retain separate identities, membership lists, and fundraising structures while uniting under a single leader. It might well seem more attractive to voters than an electoral coalition. However, like a coalition, it would have to allocate candidacies. This wasn't a problem for the original CCF, because it was a federation of parties operating separately in various provinces; but it would be a challenge for the Alliance and Tories, or the NDP and the Greens, who compete directly with each other.

Perhaps the most common approach is to create a new party in the hopes that existing parties can join a new entity more readily than they can co-operate or merge with each other. This is what happened when the Canadian Alliance was created last year, and when the CCF turned itself into the NDP in 1961. No other party joined with the CCF, but organized labour became a powerful partner with a formal constitutional position in the new party.

The new party model is attractive and sometimes successful, but it carries the risk of splitting existing parties without fully absorbing them. This happened to the Canadian Alliance when it attracted the so-called Blue Tories to its banner but left the Progressive Conservatives — battered but still intact — standing to fight the next election. The same would happen in reverse if the Tories reorganized themselves to absorb dissident Alliance elements but could not attract the entire Alliance.

The outright merger of separate parties occurs infrequently

because of the difficulty of melding existing organizations, but it is possible. A recent Canadian example is the two-stage formation of the Parti Québécois in 1968. First René Lévesque's Mouvement Souveraineté-Association merged with Gilles Grégoire's Ralliement National, after which Pierre Bourgault's Rassemblement pour l'Indépendance Nationale joined in.

Outright merger may be the ideal solution, but history shows few successful cases except where the founding partners were small and had little to lose. It is much harder for large organizations already endowed with members, money, and MPs to add the fourth M — merger. There are, however, cases, such as the Canadian CCF and the New Zealand Alliance, where parties founded as federations (preceded to some degree by electoral coalitions) gradually turned themselves into fully merged parties.

So there it is — five models to choose from, each of which can be varied in detail. None may be ideal, but each can work better than the current free-for-all. The first set of politicians to exhibit creative statesmanship in applying these models may succeed faster than anyone imagines in replacing a Liberal government that most Canadians would like to get rid of if they could see a realistic alternative.

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